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SALT Talk: A Base for Its Alphabet Soup

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WASHINGTON—Get ready for MIRVs, ODS and FRODS.

That's SALT talk, the language of the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty. The vocabulary of the new arms-control pact with the Soviet Union is as complex as the agreement itself. And as the debate over Senate ratification of SALT II heats up, the American public is about to be peppered with SALT jargon.

Consider, for instance, a booklet the State Department has prepared for public distribution to explain the new treaty. SALT II, it says, sets "an equal aggregate limit on the number of strategic nuclear delivery vehicles — ICBM and SLBM launchers, heavy bombers and ASBMs."

If that isn't clear, here is what it means: SALT II, which would run through 1985, would limit the U.S. and the Soviet Union to deployed forces of no more than 2,250 long-range, land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), bombers and air-to-surface ballistic missiles (ASBMs) launched from planes.

Understanding such talk is important to understanding issues in the SALT debate. But such jargon also may help explain why many Americans aren't well informed about SALT. One recent poll showed that only 23% of those surveyed knew that the negotiations involve the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

SALT talk doesn't give a very graphic picture of what is at issue—the control of thousands of nuclear weapons, most of which are hundreds of times more destructive than the atomic bomb the U.S. dropped on Hiroshima. This is partly because arms controllers don't talk about bombs or even warheads (the missile part that contains the explosives); instead, they talk about RVs or reentry vehicles.

The term is derived from the way ballistic missiles work. A rocket-propelled missile flies an elliptical trajectory into space. The warheads then reenter the atmosphere and glide along predetermined paths to their targets. Most modern missiles carry several warheads, each of which is programmed to hit a separate target. These are called multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles, or MIRVs.

The gravest strategic threat to the U.S. is the Soviet Union's newly developed ability to place large numbers of highly accurate warheads on their modern ICBMs.

SALT II would begin to limit warhead deployments. Each side would be restricted to 1,320 "MIRVed" weapons. ICBMs could carry a maximum of 10 warheads, while SLBMs could bear up to 14. In simple terms, this is called a "fractionation limit."

Within the MIRV ceiling, about 120 weapon-launchers can be bombers carrying air-launched cruise missiles, or ALCMs. There also are ground and sea launched cruise missiles, known respectively as GLCMs and SLCMs. The pronunciations of these acronyms together sound like the name of a Washington law firm—Alkums, Glikums and Slikums.

U.S. cruise missiles are highly accurate, pilotless jets that fly low enough to evade enemy radar. When deployed on U.S. bombers, they will be an important part of what Defense Secretary Harold Brown—fluently bilingual in SALT talk and English—calls "the air breathing leg" of U.S. strategic forces. This anatomically acrobatic phrase describes how the jet engines, unlike rockets, use air when their fuel burns.

A major issue when the Senate debates SALT will be whether the U.S. can verify Soviet compliance with the new weapons limits. Verification obviously is important because arms controllers have developed a special vocabulary for it.

Verification would be performed by "national technical means," a delicate way to describe photographic spy satellites, powerful antennae for intercepting communications signals and big radars. And because SALT II is more complex than SALT I, the new treaty would contain new verification provisions involving ODS and FRODS.

ODS are "observable differences" and FRODS are "functionally related observable differences." The terms describe design details that allow observers to spot what SALT people call "bomber variants"—planes that look like bombers but aren't. For instance, the Soviet Union's Bison Bombers are counted under the SALT limits, but the Soviets would give special designs—or ODS and FRODS—to about 50 Bisons that aren't counted because the planes have been converted to fuel tankers.

SALT talk is abstruse because it describes a complicated subject. "Arms control is an unnatural act," says Paul Warnke, the administration's former SALT negotiator. So it's no wonder that the language of arms control is unnatural as well.

But if the arms-control terminology becomes too complex, the public may demand negotiations toward another kind of agreement — Limits on SALT Talk, or LOST.

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